

Backwell Environment Trust
Bulletin 52 - Spring 2026
www.backwellenvironmenttrust.org



A Very Warm Welcome to our Spring Bulletin

Springtime on the reserves has been spectacular this year with carpets of bluebells, cowslips and wild garlic covering the woodland floor. We're very pleased to say that it looks like the worst of ash dieback disease is behind us now and that the woodland is very quickly regenerating.

Ash Dieback

Jubilee Stone

Reserve Report

Bird Box Survey

New Species

BET Merchandise

Charity Walks

Earlier Springs?



Ash Dieback Update

BET is now in its fifth year of dealing with the consequences of ash dieback disease but finally, this winter has seen a major reduction in the number of ash trees remaining to be felled. Less than 40 trees were felled this winter compared to around 150 when the disease was at its height. Additionally, all of the infected trees were of a reasonable size so were able to be felled by BET's volunteers. In line with the current scientific advice, we are only removing ash trees within striking distance of roads and footpaths when they lose 50% or more of their leaf canopy, the consensus being that at this advanced stage of decline, there is no realistic hope of recovery.

Whilst all of BET's ash trees would appear to be



infected with the disease, the rate of decline in individual trees has been quite marked. Some trees have succumbed quickly to the fungal infection whilst others appear to be offering more resistance to the disease. Only time will tell how this will play out, but we are always hopeful that at least some of our trees will be able to fight off the disease and their seeds will go on to re-populate the woodland.

As in previous years, we have had to remove a quantity of diseased timber from our reserves. Our partnership with Backwell Logs has been very beneficial to us with our volunteers taking on the arduous task of moving the logs to a suitable road-side location for collection.





Not an April Fools Joke!



It may look like a joke, but in 1978 the Parish Council proposed moving the Jubilee Stone from the top of Backwell Hill to the village playing fields.

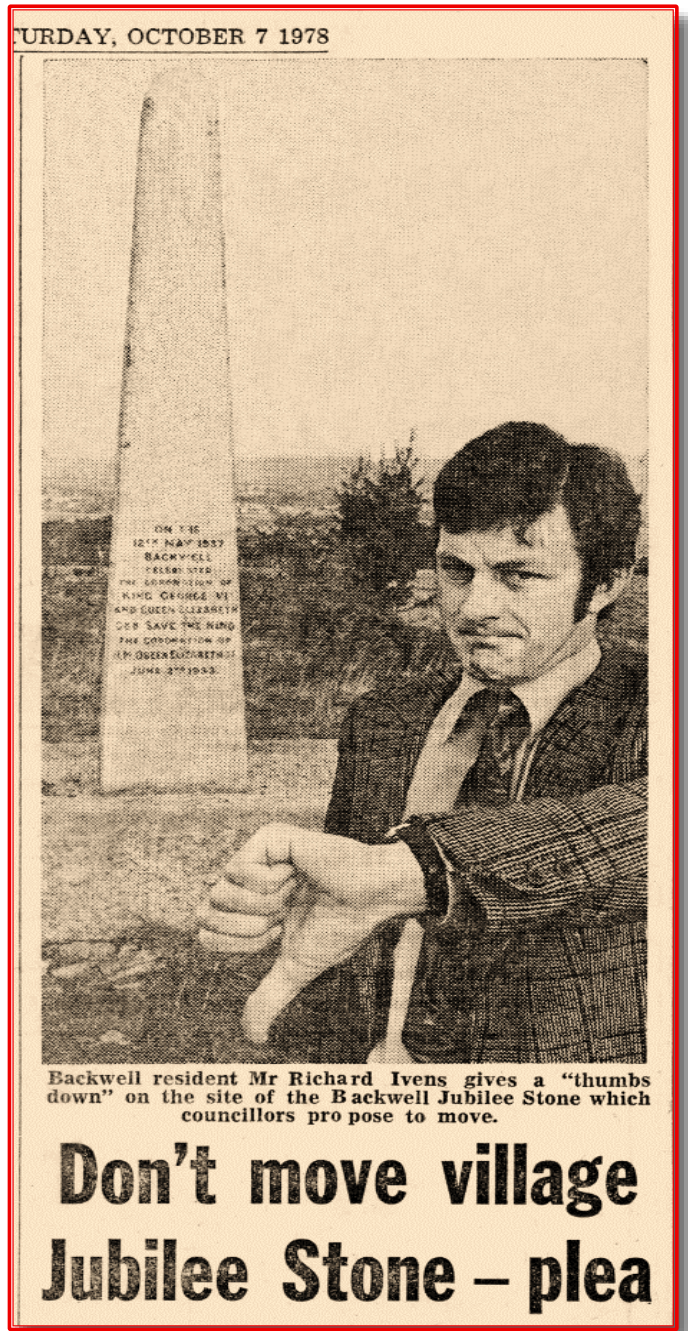
We are grateful to BET member Richard Ivens for sending us this newspaper cutting from 1978 and his correspondence with the Council.

The Council were concerned about potential vandalism on the remote hilltop and also thought that the Stone would be seen by more people if it was moved into the village.

Richard led the campaign to appeal against the proposed move from the location where it had been erected in 1897, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee.

He raised a petition to leave the Stone "superbly situated in one of the finest settings in the Parish" and secured the signatures of more than 300 local people.

The Council dropped the proposal and the Jubilee Stone has remained in its prominent position on the hill, with inscriptions added for successive coronations and jubilees.



Reserve Report

Our volunteers have once again been very busy on our nature reserves during the last six months completing the hand scything our two acres of wildflower meadows and removing some of the smaller ash trees close to the footpaths with advanced ash dieback disease. We've also been cutting

back vegetation along our network of footpaths, laying hedges, repairing steps and excavating the cottage in Badgers Wood close to the Cabin.

So just what have those hard-working BET volunteers been up to over the past six months?

Jubilee Stone Wood Hedgelaying

The BET volunteers have been re-laying numerous sections of hedgerow along the boundary between Jubilee Stone Wood and our neighbour's field. We were especially keen to make sure our borders were secure before the introduction of sheep to the field next month. The newly laid hedges are now much thicker than before which should offer good nesting opportunities to both birds and mammals. Additionally, the extra sunlight now reaching the ground will encourage wildflowers along the bridleway edges.



Ash Tree Coppicing

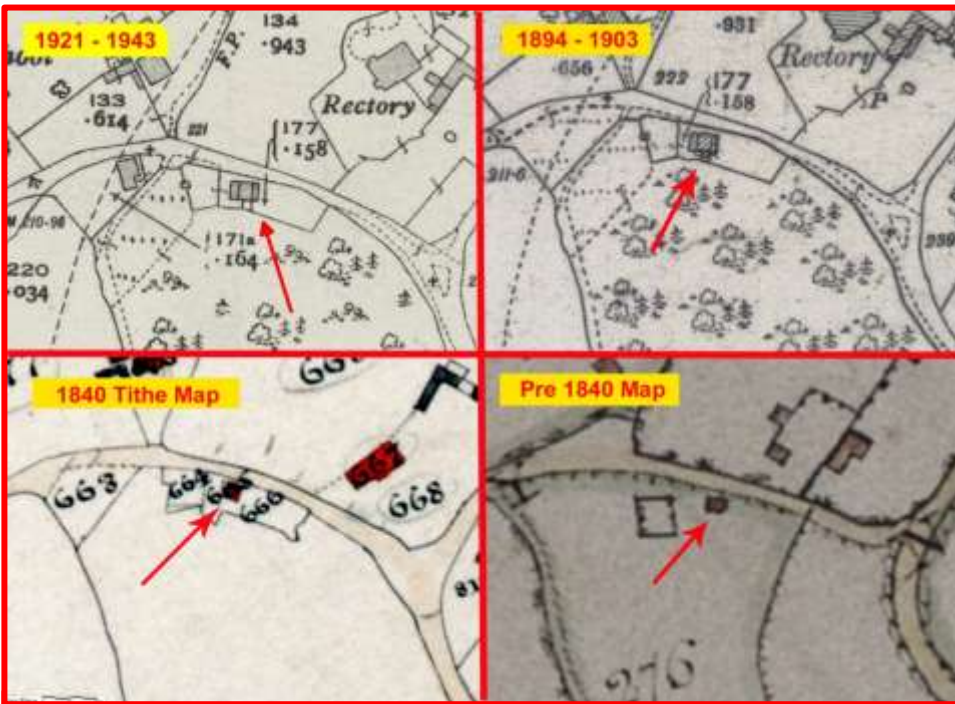
Over the winter months, our volunteers have continued to coppice ash trees in an advanced state of decline within striking distance of our footpaths and roads. The disease has pretty well run its course now and consequently the number of trees needing to be felled has declined sharply.

As in previous years, some timber has been left on the reserves to decay naturally whilst any excess has been removed by our partners, Backwell Logs, where the wood can be used locally with minimal transport miles.

The Badgers Wood Cottage

If you walk along the path close to the narrowest section of Church Town, you will see the remains of an abandoned cottage hidden deep in the undergrowth. Over the years, the BET volunteers have sporadically excavated the remains, but one of our volunteers, Brian Smith, has now taken the project on and discovered new sections of wall and floors.

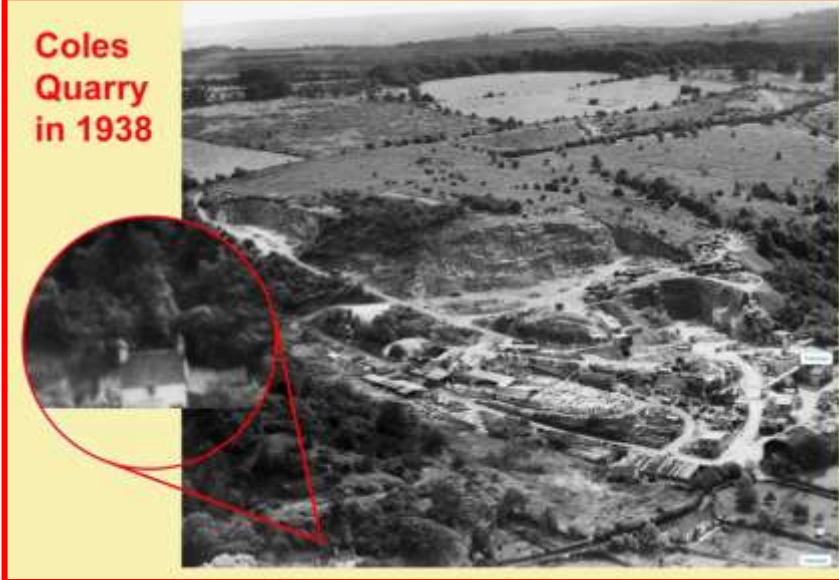
From old maps, we can be sure the cottage was in use before 1840 and was still lived in up to at least 1938 as it's just captured in an old quarry picture.



The cottage was small in size, the main building being only 6x4 metres in area. It had a ground and an upper floor with two chimneys. The newly-discovered steps would suggest that there was a cottage garden on the flat area to the rear of the property.

Considering the cottage was only abandoned around 80 years ago, it's intriguing how little of it remains today.

The excavations have revealed some ash deposits and this, together with the fact that no traces of timber have been uncovered, could suggest that the cottage may have been damaged by fire.



Coles Quarry in 1938



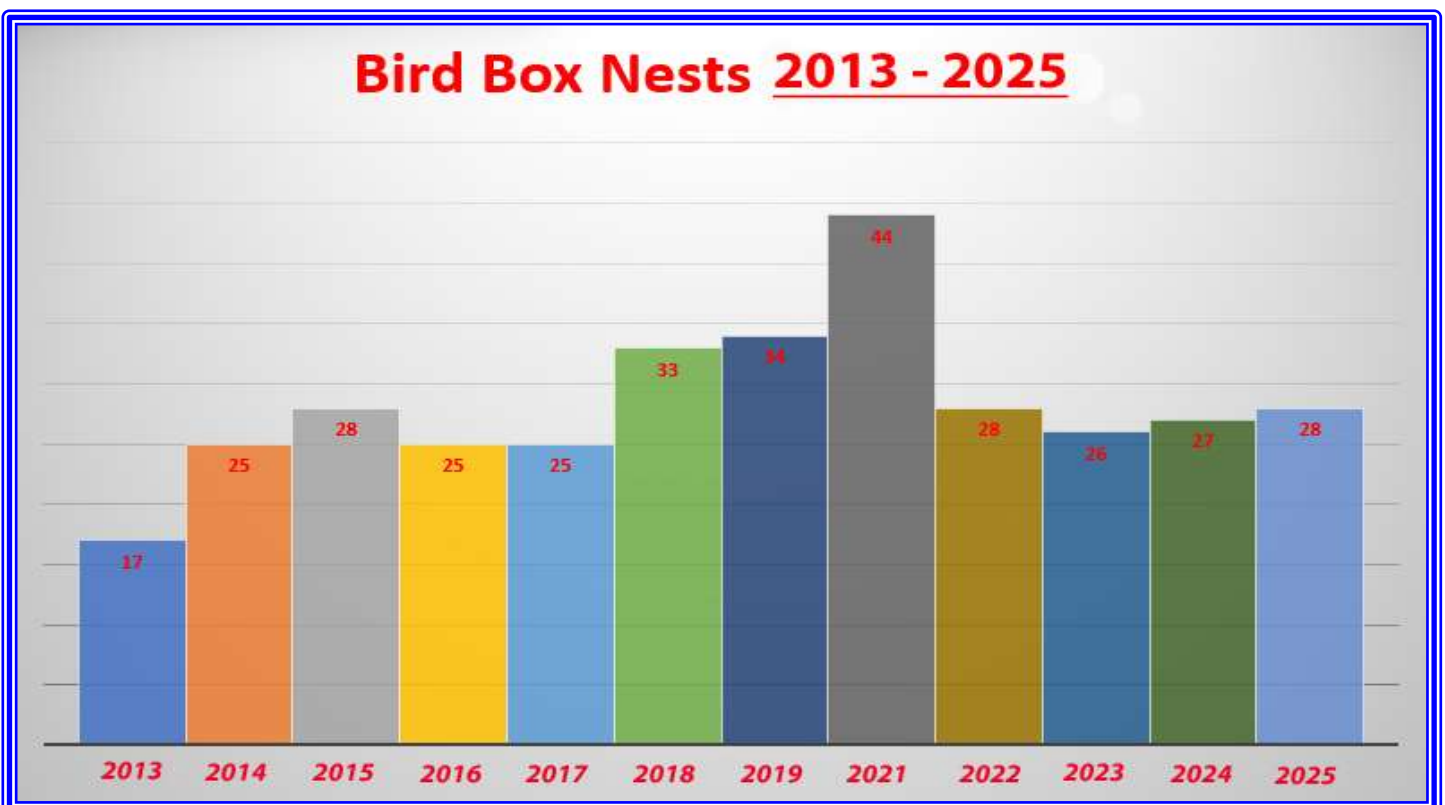
Winter Bird Box Survey

Every winter, a dedicated group of BET volunteers survey the considerable number of bird boxes in our woodlands, recording usage and any other observations. At the same time, the opportunity is taken to clean out any old nesting material from the boxes. Removing the old nest is an essential task as it removes any possible parasites and/or fungal spores which could have a detrimental effect on the chicks of the coming season. When our wooden nest boxes finally become irreparable, we are replacing them with 'Woodcrete' boxes made with a mixture of concrete and woodchip. Whilst these boxes are typically twice the price of the wooden boxes, they could last for up to 50 years and also offer better insulation for the nesting birds, protecting them from the extremes of hot and cold.



The winter 2025/6 bird nest survey recorded 28 bird nests with 8 showing signs of dormouse usage. Out of the 54 boxes surveyed, 59% of them had been occupied either by birds or mammals which is in line with the results of last year.

Bird Box Nests 2013 - 2025



New Species on the Reserves

The Woodcock is a distinctive and fascinating bird, best known for its secretive habits and remarkable adaptations to life on the forest floor. Belonging to the sandpiper family, woodcocks are found across Europe, Asia, and North America, with the Eurasian woodcock and the American woodcock being the most well-known species. Despite their classification as wading birds, they are more commonly associated with woodland habitats than wetlands. They are present in North Somerset, although they are not particularly common. Whilst we haven't yet had a visual sighting of the bird on the BET reserves, two experienced ornithologists have independently identified their call.



One of the woodcock's most striking features is its long, straight bill, which is perfectly adapted for probing soft soil in search of food. Earthworms make up the bulk of its diet, though it also consumes insects and other invertebrates. The tip of the bill is highly sensitive and can detect



movement underground, allowing the bird to locate prey without seeing it. This specialized feeding technique is supported by the bird's preference for damp, rich soils typically found in deciduous or mixed forests.

The woodcock's appearance is another example of effective adaptation. Its mottled brown, black, and grey plumage provides excellent camouflage against leaf

litter, making it extremely difficult to spot when it remains still. This natural concealment is essential for avoiding predators, as the bird relies more on staying hidden than on fleeing. When flushed, however, it bursts into erratic flight, zigzagging through trees to escape danger. Perhaps the most famous behaviour of the woodcock is its elaborate courtship display, often referred to as the 'sky dance.' At dusk during the breeding season, males take to the air in a spiralling ascent, accompanied by a series of chirps and twittering sounds produced by their wings. After reaching a considerable height, they descend in a fluttering, zigzag pattern while continuing to vocalize. This behaviour is designed to attract females and establish territory, and it is considered one of the most enchanting spectacles in bird behaviour.

Woodcocks are also notable for their unusual eye placement. Their large eyes are set high and far back on the head, giving them a nearly 360-degree field of vision. This adaptation allows them to watch for predators even while their bill is buried in the soil searching for food. Despite their elusive nature, woodcocks play an important role in forest ecosystems, particularly in controlling insect populations and contributing to soil health. Their presence is often an indicator of a healthy woodland environment. Overall, the woodcock is a remarkable bird whose unique characteristics and behaviours make it a subject of enduring interest for birdwatchers and naturalists alike.



BET Merchandise

We are pleased to offer a range of garments bearing the BET logo, for our members and friends to show off and support BET.

For full details of the garment range, prices and how to order, have a look at "BET Merchandise" on the BET website backwellenvironmenttrust.org

There is a large range of items and colours to suit all tastes and weathers.

Several bold members have opted for the large logo on high-visibility hoodies!



Others have chosen the smaller logo on more subdued coloured T-shirts, sweatshirts or hats.

We also hold a stock of woven BET badges at £4 which can be sewn onto bags or jackets.



Why not grab an item and help spread the BET word?



NAILSEA CHARITY 5k 2026

Raise money for your favourite charity
Walk or Run 5k – or optional 10k or 20k

Sunday, 7th June
or any day up to 30th June

Rotary Nailsea and Backwell

NAILSEA CHARITY WALKS & RUNS 2026 (organised by Rotary Nailsea & Backwell) will take place on Sunday 7th June. If that date doesn't suit you then you can do it at any time up to the end of June. Each year over £20,000 is raised for local organisations and BET is pleased to support the event.

The 5k walk starts and finishes at the Scotch Horn Leisure Centre in Nailsea and follows footpaths around Nailsea and Wraxall. It is an easy fun walk - or a not too taxing fun run to start the day! The event is suitable for all ages and level of fitness with the route being pushchair/stroller, wheelchair and disability vehicle friendly. Maps and directions will be provided for optional cross-country 10K and 20K routes but these will not have been checked, nor will there be any signage.

The day is a great opportunity for people to get together, enjoy the local countryside and raise money for deserving causes.

Full details, registration and sponsorship forms can be found on the Rotary website: tinyurl.com/mrymz28z

We would be pleased if you nominate BET as your charity of choice on the registration form.



Just a reminder that when you are out and about in the countryside, or even in your garden, it is always wise to be on the lookout for ticks. Ticks are very small insects (between 0.5mm and 2mm) and when you walk through vegetation, they can attach themselves to your clothing. Once on you, they will try to find some exposed skin - the softer the skin the better (!) - where they will very firmly attach themselves. Over recent years, it would seem a higher proportion of these insects now carry Lyme Disease which can turn out to be quite serious if not diagnosed and treated promptly. So, when you're in the countryside, always check for ticks when you get home and if you find one, the best way to remove them is with a tick remover (on sale at the vets) otherwise, you can use tweezers. If you remove the tick within about 24 hours of being bitten, the chances of being infected are very low, but even if find one after that time, the chance of contracting Lyme Disease from a single bite is extremely remote. However, just in case, if you do get flu-like symptoms, especially with a red, circular rash where you were bitten, see your doctor ASAP.



Over the 40 years that I have been working in the countryside, I estimate I have been bitten around 5,000 times and I have only had symptoms of the disease once, so please don't let them spoil your day out. Just remember to have a good check when you get home! Jan



Is Spring Starting Earlier?

There is clear and growing evidence that spring is arriving earlier in the UK, and this shift has become more pronounced over the past century. Scientists study these seasonal patterns through a field called phenology, which looks at when plants flower, trees leaf and animals breed or migrate. Long-term records from across Britain show a consistent trend: many of these natural events are happening approximately 8 days earlier compared to historic data.



One of the strongest indicators comes

from plant life. Historical observations, some dating back to the 18th century, reveal that flowering

times for many species have advanced significantly. On average, plants in the UK now bloom several weeks earlier than they did in the past. Familiar spring flowers such as snowdrops, daffodils, and bluebells are often seen earlier in the year, sometimes appearing in mid-winter during particularly mild years. This shift is not limited to plants - trees are also leafing earlier and agricultural growing seasons are gradually lengthening.



The primary cause of this change is rising temperatures linked to climate change. The UK has experienced a steady increase in average temperatures, with spring being one of the fastest-warming seasons. Even small increases in temperature can have a noticeable impact on biological timing. Warmer conditions in late winter and early spring trigger plants to grow sooner and encourage insects and animals to become active earlier than usual.



Wildlife behaviour also reflects this shift. Many bird species are laying eggs earlier, and some insects, such as butterflies and bees,

are emerging ahead of their historical schedules. While this might seem like a natural adjustment, it can create ecological challenges. Different species respond to temperature changes at different rates, which can lead to mismatches in timing. For example, if caterpillars emerge earlier due to warmer weather but birds do not adjust their breeding times accordingly, there may be less food available for chicks when they hatch.



Although an earlier spring can have some benefits - such as longer growing seasons for crops and more time for outdoor activities, it also raises concerns about the stability of ecosystems. Sudden cold snaps, which still occur in the UK, can damage early blossoms or harm wildlife that has emerged too soon. This makes the effects of earlier springs unpredictable and sometimes harmful.

In conclusion, the evidence strongly suggests that spring is indeed coming earlier to the UK. Driven largely by climate change, this shift is affecting plants, animals, and ecosystems in complex ways. While it may bring some short-term advantages, it also highlights the broader environmental changes taking place and the need to better understand and respond to their long-term impacts.